

Duxbury Clipper, Thursday, October 8, 1981

Duxbury Clamming Not What It Used To Be

In the 1975 January issue of *Bostonia*, the B.U. Alumni magazine, was an article titled: "The Massachusetts Clam Industry." Some excerpts from this article follow:

"Back in its peak year of production -- 1936 -- Duxbury Bay was tapped for 177,000 bushels of clams. They sold at \$1.50 a bushel. In 1950 this same area gave up only 170 bushels, and their cost rose to the high price of \$5 a bushel. The number of commercial diggers in the same area stood at 117 in 1936, and in 1950 there were only 44 diggers."

The clamming industry in this state, once a million dollar enterprise, has faded in the last 15 years because of a change in the configuration of the coastline and because of such predators as horseshoe crabs and snails. Water pollution from sewage and industrial waste has closed more than 65 percent of the state's productive shellfish areas.

Duxbury clams are not so famous today as they were at the turn of the century, when they were occasionally mentioned in Gay Ninety cookbooks, but an intensive research program is underway to see what can be done about increasing their supply in Massachusetts.

Clam Supply Dwindling

By 1914, according to a newspaper account, the supply of Duxbury clams had dwindled and diggers were lucky to get half a dozen buckets instead of the 25 to 30 buckets they had formerly been digging between tides. "And the bivalves are small.

"For 30 years," said the account, "the flavor of the Duxbury clam has possessed an individuality of its own, and wherever it dallied with a palate there it made a friend. Thus the inherent blandishments of this unique clam have given it a place among the high-class luxuries of the world, and, like the celebrated Providence river oyster, its intrinsic worth has bred base imitators.

"It is canned, pickled and dried, and it has found its way to every zone and every clime. Epicures in remote places have sent to Duxbury for seed clams that they might grow crops of their own, and wherever the baby clams were dropped for development there would flock the gull and coot.

"Three years ago and up to the present time (1914) the subject of Duxbury's moribund industry has been first in the daily and nightly discussions. Suggestions were broached, dissected and looked at from all possible positions. A closed season for several years was talked of, but this did not seem to tickle the popular fancy and discussion on that

point was dropped. Finally some wise old clamdigger suggested planting."

"That's the idea," said the weather browned clammer, "but we'll have to put them under the mud so the gulls can't get at them."

"Right you are," said a second clammer, "put them under a little way and they'll work down, but if you drop those little seedlings on the beach the gulls won't do a thing but hold high carnival over them."

So it was decided that the great Duxbury clam beach should be turned into an immense garden in which clams should be planted, and when the town election day comes next spring the people will vote on the proposition of appropriating money to gather young clams and place them where they will do the most good.

It is said that the people of Duxbury are practically a unit on the question of clam planting and clam protection, and when the law, which the

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prompters of the new industry have in mind becomes operative, each digger of clams in the Duxbury clam garden will have to pay into the town treasury a revenue of 5 cents per bucket.

Clam chowder is supposed to have originated in Duxbury. An early settler, Ruth Alden Bass (doubtless a descendant of Priscilla and John Alden) was walking along the beach looking for driftwood. She saw some pigs rooting for clams and eating them with relish. Somehow the idea stuck in her mind. Later, when her own family faced famine in the exigencies of scratching a living from barren soil on a storm-ridden coast, she remembered the pigs. She dug a basket and boiled them with milk. Her spouse said she must be touched in the head to think of serving such food. "Better to die of the eating than the starving." They ate and survived.

Clam Recipe
(Here is a recipe from

Ruth Wakefield's **Toll House Cookbook** printed in the Dec. 8, 1955 issue of the **Clipper**.)

Duxbury Escalloped Clams

"Using a large sauce pan, make 1 1/2 cups Thin White Sauce. Add 1 teaspoon grated onion, pepper and paprika to season very well. Drain the liquor from 2 cups clams chopped coarsley.

Scald the clam liquor and add to the white sauce. Add clams and 1 1/2 cups coarsely broken soda crackers.

"Blend and let stand for a few minutes to allow the crumbs to absorb the liquid. After they are swollen and have fully absorbed the liquid, if they seem dry add more milk until they are thoroughly moistened. Pour into a buttered

improves the flavor. Serves 4 generously.

"In Duxbury, where I live, the McNaught sisters are considered our authorities on Escalloped Clams. Each sister puts her clam dish together differently although the ingredients are the same. This is Mrs. Charles McNaught's recipe.

"Mrs. Harry McNaught places the clams and crumbs in her baking dish in layers, then pours the liquid over all. They make these Escalloped Clams in huge quantities for our traditional summer church supper from this recipe, which originally came from the Minister Thomas's wife over 60 years ago."

glass casserole. Cover with additional crumbs, dot with butter. Beat 1 egg and pour over the top. Bake in a 375 degree oven until top puffs. If crackers are browning too fast reduce heat and bake until top remains puffed firmly and does not fall when removed from oven. An hour is not too much time in the oven as the long cooking

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Giant Clam

(From the Sept. 16, 1954 issue of the **Clipper**.)

A clipping from the Boston Post (date unknown) includes a photo under the caption "Giant Clam Dug Up From Duxbury Beach." It concerns a clam found by Harry Foye of So. Duxbury. "The clam is 6 and 3-quarter inches long and 4 inches wide. It weighs 31 ounces," said Mr. Foye. The story continues: "When the monster was shown to a Boston clam connoisseur he remarked: 'That clam must have been here when Christopher Columbus discovered America. It is the largest clam I have ever seen.'"

(Here is a World War I story that appeared in the Boston Post:)

Sad news has come up from Duxbury. The singing clams, which have made that town melodious for lo, these many years, are disappearing. Their sweet chant is soon to disappear forever from the sands of that old Pilgrim town. And Duxbury is all broken up about it. In fact, it's a real clamity.

Why? Why are they disappearing?

They're disappearing because of the inordinate appetites of the summer residents. A poor clam cannot stick his head above water and carol a little nautical ditty without some hungry summer resident trying to lasso him and tear him from his ancestral hearthstone with malice afterthought and intent to deposit him in a stewpan.

The surprising thing about these clams is that they have a decided aversion to water.

"This combined with their operatic abilities," or-

nithologists say, "only goes to prove that they are descended from birds."

They are particularly fond of building their homes and rearing their families in nice, soft mud.

Years ago there were millions of them there and the grand chorus, about low tide, was something grand and edifying. Then in would come the tide. As the waves and wavelets scampered o'er the choir loft the singing gradually faded away as the surf boomed against the stern and rock hound shore. Which is much more romantic than chucking 'em into chowder.

You know, the French cable came into Duxbury, and the fellow over in Brest, which is in France, oftentimes stops in the middle of sending a story of how the Russians have curry-combed one of their generals for strategical reasons, and listens to the singing of the clams.

Whenever he sends a story of a French victory the clams always sing the "Marseillaise."

(Note: At this point the author was gently but firmly tapped on the head with 4 cubic yards of pig iron.)